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The 9/11 of 1859

By TONY HORWITZ

Charles Town, W.Va.

ONE hundred and fifty years ago today, the most successful terrorist in American history was hanged at the edge of this Shenandoah Valley town. Before climbing atop his coffin for the wagon ride to the gallows, he handed a note to one of his jailers: “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.”

Eighteen months later, Americans went to war against each other, with soldiers marching into battle singing “John Brown’s Body.” More than 600,000 men died before the sin of slavery was purged.

Few if any Americans today would question the justness of John Brown’s cause: the abolition of human bondage. But as the nation prepares to try Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who calls himself the architect of the 9/11 attacks, it may be worth pondering the parallels between John Brown’s raid in 1859 and Al Qaeda’s assault in 2001.

Brown was a bearded fundamentalist who believed himself chosen by God to destroy the institution of slavery. He hoped to launch his holy war by seizing the United States armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., and arming blacks for a campaign of liberation. Brown also chose his target for shock value and symbolic impact. The only federal armory in the South, Harpers Ferry was just 60 miles from the capital, where “our president and other leeches,” Brown wrote, did the bidding of slave owners. The first slaves freed and armed by Brown belonged to George Washington’s great-grandnephew.

Brown’s strike force was similar in size and make-up to that of the 9/11 hijackers. He led 21 men, all but two in their 20s, and many of them radicalized by guerrilla fighting in Bleeding Kansas, the abolitionists’ Afghanistan. Brown also relied on covert backers — not oil-rich Saudis, but prominent Yankees known as the Secret Six. Brown used aliases and coded language and gathered his men at a mountain hideout. But, like the 9/11 bombers, Brown’s men were indiscreet, disclosing their plan to family and sweethearts. A letter warning of the plot even reached the secretary of war. It arrived in August, the scheme seemed outlandish, and the warning was ignored.

Brown and his men were prepared to die, and most did, in what quickly became a suicide mission. Trapped in Harpers Ferry, the raiders fought for 24 hours until Robert E. Lee ordered marines to storm the building where the survivors had holed up. Ten raiders were killed, including two of Brown’s sons, and seven more hanged. No slaves won their freedom. The first civilian casualty was a free black railroad worker, shot in the back while fleeing the raiders.

This fiasco might have been a footnote of history if Brown had died of his wounds or been immediately executed. Instead, he survived, and was tried under tight security in a civilian court in Charles Town, near Harpers Ferry. Rather than challenge the evidence, or let his lawyers plead insanity, Brown put the South on trial. Citing the biblical injunction to “remember them that are in bonds,” he declared his action “was not wrong, but right.”

“If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice,” he said, “and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel and unjust enactments — I submit; so let it be done!” He was hanged a month later, before a crowd that included John Wilkes Booth, who later wrote of the “terroriser” with a mix of contempt and awe.

Brown’s courage and eloquence made him a martyr-hero for many in the North. This canonization, in turn, deepened Southern rage and alarm over the raid. Though Brown occupied the far fringe of abolitionism — a “wild and absurd freak,” The New York Times called him — Southern firebrands painted his raid as part of a broad conspiracy. An already polarized nation lurched closer to violent divorce. “The time for compromise was gone,” Frederick Douglass later observed. “The armed hosts of freedom stood face to face over the chasm of a broken Union, and the clash of arms was at hand.” This was exactly what Brown had predicted in his final note.

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed is no John Brown. The 9/11 attack caused mass, indiscriminate slaughter, for inscrutable ends. Brown fed breakfast to his hostages; the hijackers slit throats with box cutters. Any words Mr. Mohammed may offer in his own defense will likely strike Americans as hateful and unpersuasive. In any event, the judge probably won’t grant him an ideological platform.

But perhaps he doesn’t need one. In 1859, John Brown sought not only to free slaves in Virginia but to terrorize the South and incite a broad conflict. In this he triumphed: panicked whites soon mobilized, militarized and marched double-quick toward secession. Brown’s raid didn’t cause the Civil War, but it was certainly a catalyst.

It may be too early to say if 9/11 bred a similar overreaction. But last night President Obama vowed to increase our efforts in Afghanistan — one of two wars that, eight years on, have killed nearly twice as many Americans as the hijacked planes. The nation, beset by the wars’ burden, will continue to find its domestic and foreign policy options hobbled.

Show trial or no trial, terrorists sometimes win.

Tony Horwitz is the author of “Confederates in the Attic” and “A Voyage Long and Strange.” He is working on a book about John Brown’s raid.

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